

**DIY urbanism as an environmental justice strategy:  
The Case Study of Time's Up! 1987-2012**

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Time's Up! is a New York environmental group which promotes non-polluting transportation and sustainable solutions to urban problems. Over the last twenty-five years, the group has taken a do-it-yourself approach to environmental activism, bridging neighborhood, global justice, and Occupy movements. With roots in the squatter movement in New York, Time's Up! has built its own distinct brand of DIY urbanism to fight for community gardens, support group bike rides, and create sustainable approaches to urban living. While the group makes use of a wide range of approaches to reclaim public space, direct action is its guiding principle. The group links social networks with alternative approaches to community building outside of institutional channels. The following considers Time's Up! as a case study in environmental justice DIY urbanism. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Transformative Studies Institute. E-mail address: [journal@transformativestudies.org](mailto:journal@transformativestudies.org) Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2014 by The Transformative Studies Institute. All rights reserved.]*

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"The idea of just going out and doing it, or as it is popularly expressed in the underground, the do-it-yourself ethic... is not just complaining about what is, but actually doing something different," notes New York activist Steve Duncombe (1997). Over the last quarter century, Time's Up! has taken just such a DIY approach to shaping the urban landscape of New York. Since its founding in 1987, the group has put forward sustainable solutions to urban problems such as pollution, increasing asthma rates, lack of green space, global warming, and congestion, through a direct action approach to street activism, demonstrating the possibilities of community gardens, non-polluting transportation, and bike power. The group has repeatedly offered cost effective approaches to challenges of city living. Rather than implore those in power or ask for permission, these activists helped shape what streets and public space could look like with graffiti, guerilla gardening, and festive bike rides, reclaiming vacant lots and car-cluttered streets for people-based uses. In doing so, Time's Up! fashioned the city as a mutable work of art challenging the increasingly contested nature of public space (Shepard and Smithsimon, 2011).

As with many cities, public space in New York is subject to a highly competitive struggle over access, land use, rules, and policies governing a global city. Over and over, those favoring DIY uses of public space have had to compete with those who see public space as a commodity from which to maximize profit by the inch (Logan and Molotch, 1987; Shepard and Smithsimon, 2011). These are struggles over the very nature and meaning of urban space. Influenced by movements from squatting to Global Justice and Occupy, Time's Up! has honed innovations in direct action in support of a more sustainable brand of urbanism, helping urban spaces feel vibrant, sustainable, and user-friendly. The following considers the ways the group supported efforts around community gardens and biking, while fashioning a distinct model of sustainable urbanism.

Full disclosure: I have been a volunteer with Time's Up! and the do-it-yourself movement in activism in New York for well over a decade. This qualitative case study builds on multiple data sources including my voice as an observing participant, discussions with other participants, and historic accounts to highlight the story of Time's Up! and the public space movements it supports (Butters, 1983; Patton, 2001; Tedlock, 1991). Case studies such as this are effective for exploring and describing the life course of both social movements and community organizations (Snow and Trom, 2002; Yin, 1995). This form of research

is useful for considering urban behavior and political participation seen throughout this report, as well as highlighting effective practices in planning and development, translating knowledge into action as Time's Up! has done to fashion its own distinct brand of sustainable urbanism (Birch, 2012; Shepard, 2013). In asserting a right to urban space by challenging a system of automobility, Time's Up! takes part in a distinct lineage of cycling activism extending from the Women's Movement to European socialism, environmentalism and anarchism, the Provo to Situationism, and clashes in the streets during the Republican National Convention and the Occupy Movement. Here, Time's Up!'s cycling advocacy is part of a pro-urban politics, which Henri Lefebvre described as a "right to the city" (Furness, 2010; Harvey, 2013; Horton, 2006).

Through the case study of Time's Up!, we explore do-it-yourself strategies vs. more conventional strategies for urban transformation. When liberal reformers arrive, radical wings often follow, pushing change through direct action rather than more deliberate means. For Martin Luther King's message of nonviolence, there was Malcolm X who preached change "by any means necessary." While liberal environmental groups such as Sierra Club support legal means to preserve the natural environment, more radical groups such as Earth First and Earth Liberation Front support blockades; Sierra Club sues and Earth First members climb into old growth trees to save them (Butterfly, 2010; Rosebraugh, 2004; Shepard, 2011). In terms of cycling, Transportation Alternatives, a liberal group in New York, supports efforts at non-polluting transportation using legal means, while Time's Up! stays in the streets, organizing group rides, workshops, and direct-action based strategies. The following case study considers this direct-action based strategy for social change. Throughout this paper, I consider the question: Where do such approaches fit into debates about cities, play, success, mobilization, and social movements? By the conclusion, I review the case study's lessons about capacity, leadership, sustainability, and alliances. To begin the case study, I situate Time's Up! within a lineage of cycling and streets = based urban activism.

## **CYCLING, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, AND PUBLIC SPACE**

"Before cars came along... the streets were often a common, a place of popular sociability, a play space for kids," notes David Harvey (2013, 74) in his work *Rebel Cities*. Yet, Harvey (2013, 74) makes his point with a caveat. "Streets that get clogged with traffic, make that particular public space unusable... This kind of street is not a common," (p. 74).

Sadly, this is often the case in today's cities, as the commons are rendered usable and privatized. Yet, this need not be the case. In response to expanding systems of privatization and automobility, a generation of cyclists have looked to the streets as spaces for alternate expressive as well as instrumental uses. Such groups argue there is more to urban living than going to and from work; they see streets as places for people to meet, play, talk, ride, create a social world within our commons, our city. In order to create its own commons, the New York based cycling group Time's Up! has filled the city streets with more and more bikes, its neighborhoods with more and more community gardens. And the city has been forced to respond by making room for these alternate, sustainable uses of urban spaces, sometimes bulldozing or making gardens permanent. Along the way, the group has taken part in a movement extending back well over a century (Furness, 2010; Horton, 2006; Shepard and Smithsimon, 2011). A review of some of this activism helps situate the case study of Time's Up!

Bicycling has long been part of struggles for urban space featuring the women's movement, environmentalism, anarchism, Situationism, and Do-It-Yourself culture. While cyclists see their efforts at non-polluting transportation as a vital source for alternatives to fossil fuels, drivers see their cars as an emblem of personal independence and privatized mobility. Most cyclists do not start off as activists. But something often happens to them on the streets; they get doored by a car, swiped by a truck, forced out of a bike lane by a car parked there, etc. Cyclists seem to run into trouble – injustices at every turn – which compel them to take part in a conversation about transportation-related pollution, oil dependency, spacial inequality, and the challenges of refashioning cities in terms of sustainable urbanism, rather than automobility (Furness, 2010; Horton, 2006). Over and over again, efforts aimed at non-polluting transportation, such as cycling, find themselves entwined within the contestation of everyday life.

In this respect, such struggles are connected to the legacy of the French Situationist International, a group of artists, filmmakers, poets, and troublemakers who hung out, talked, and planned revolution in the Left Bank Cafes of Paris in the 1950's. Its members tended to renounce work for play, drink, and sex as well as a distinct brand of urban explorations which favored being lost instead of found. They described this method of drifting as *derive*, or laying out an alternate plan of urban space. The Situationists saw their explorations as a form of street ethnography, tracing the emotive states of different neighborhoods of the city through their own brand of psychogeography. Illustrating their drifts

through the city, the Situationists embraced the concept of *flanerie*. Their journeys through the city were seen as a way to highlight a capitalist spectacle sanitizing urban living. Beneath a spectacle of official urban planning, the group hoped to reveal authentic spaces and city life teeming underneath. The group was highly critical of the models of urban renovation and planning, rejecting notions of progress seen in clearing the Paris slums to make way for middle class residents. Instead the group celebrated the street level calling for cities to rid themselves of automobiles (Lugo, 2010; McDonough, 2010).

The Situationist response to the privatization of public space included a series of guerilla activist tactics, including interventions termed "detourne" and "derive." "Detourne" refers to the rearrangement of popular signs to create new meanings, while "derive" involves walking tours throughout the city. Through these gestures we create new maps for urban living (Shepard and Smithsimon, 2013).

The city played a central role in the Situationist revolution of everyday life. Influenced by the early writings of Marx, the group suggested that social change was not simply about a change in the means of production; it involved changing control of their lives, affecting life in the street, as well as work and the factory (McDonough, 2010).

Cycling was celebrated by the Situationists as a means of challenging automization of cities colonized by the privatizing means of cars. Cyclists offered a means to remap the city. The Situationists inspired countless groups including the Provos, who helped imagine and create the DIY bike infrastructure, as well as building occupations, which would shape Amsterdam. Members of Time's Up! recognize the group's free play as well as bike program owes a great deal to the Provos. Bike activists specifically look to the theatrics of the Provos and their masterful anti-capitalist, anti-establishment antics; the result often combined riots and laughter. While the immediate effect of the pranks were viewed as minimal, the group's "white bike program," aimed at decreasing car traffic on the streets of Amsterdam in the long term, offered bikes, painted white, free of charge as a transportation alternative. These playful pranks presented students and activists a vision of an alternate way of organizing urban life, while serving as an uncomfortable reminder of idealist dreams for the liberal government. For many, the aim of movement organizing is to create not only an external solution to problems, but to create a different kind of community of support and resistance. Here, play supports a prefigurative community-building dimension, in which activists seek to embody the image of the better world they hope to create. Inspired by the Provos'

willingness to act on their views of political hypocrisy, a new wave of wildly imaginative political actors entered politics with an appetite for direct action and a distinctly rambunctious view of political hypocrisy. The prank political campaigns of the Provos, who ran for political office on a whim, produced a wide number of movement outcomes, the most strange of which was that a number were actually elected into office. Once there, some continued the antics. Others influenced the political discourse and public policy. The City of Amsterdam's extensive network of 249 miles of bike lanes, which make bike commuting a safe alternative to driving, is both the legacy of this activism and the envy of bike riders the world over (Bogad, 2005; Shepard and Smithsimon, 2011).

Like the Situationists and Provos, Time's Up! looked to struggles over streets, tracing an alternate geography of resistance with each of hundreds of monthly bike rides. Through their rides, the group aims to carve out autonomous spaces. Such *flanerie* is characterized by two key features – wayfaring and placemaking, closely observing the streets, while passing through, and making new places. Each Time's Up! bike ride involves such place-making, wherein the group carves spaces amenable to multiple uses beyond models of citizenship as shopping. Such endeavors help the group, and by extension the cycling community, to challenge the hegemony of the automobile in the urban landscape (Lugo, 2010; Shepard and Smithsimon, 2011).

The Situationists saw urban life as a contested terrain, malleable to the needs of different users, with different visions of what city spaces could be. There had to be more to urban life than the smooth flow of automobiles to and from freeways, they argued. Over time, this sentiment boiled over into a culture clash over urban space, with those who favored the car seeking to marginalize cyclists, who conversely favored more sustainable as well as egalitarian models of urbanism (Furness, 2010; Lugo, 2010).

As much as anything, cycling would involve the contested nature of public space and the people who moved through it. "The bicycle did more to emancipate women than anything else in the world," noted Susan B. Anthony, commenting on the bicycle's role in transforming gender roles in the US (Furness, 2010, p. 19). Through the bicycle individual women transcended the domestic sphere, finding a space of independence in the larger world. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the US feminist movement embraced the bicycle as a means to critique Victorian values. Groups such as the Rational Dress Society connected women's liberation and cycling, vis-à-vis social norms around dress. Elizabeth Cady

## Benjamin Shepard

Stanton saw cycling as a way to critique patriarchy and related struggles around reproductive autonomy, clothing, religion, and physical restrictions. Cycling offered a way for women to escape the confines of the home, while transforming gendered norms of public space. The bicycle became an “apt metaphor for independence and iconic signifier of freedom itself,” notes Zack Furness (2010, p.45). European Socialists viewed it as a symbol of freedom and means for articulating a cultural politics of the left. Feminists embraced it as a source of empowerment, as a way to escape coerced domesticity (Furness, 2010, p.45-6).

### BLONDIE OF ARABIA, BIKES, AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE

Over the years, this sentiment continued as cycling has become connected to a DIY culture embraced by those involved in the Riot Girl, anarchist, and public space movements (Shepard and Smithsimon, 2011). “Put the Revolution Between Your Legs” read the paint on a woman’s body at the Time’s Up! 2013 World Naked Bike Ride in New York. Today, cyclists embrace the notion of cycling as a metaphor for personal freedom, as well as cultural transformation. Take Monica Hunken, a volunteer with Time’s Up! In 2009, Hunken traveled to Saudi Arabia, riding around the country on her bicycle. Hunken was ridiculed as well as embraced by locals. Some threw rocks at this American cyclist with blonde hair, who had the audacity to challenge social mores in this way. The theme of the contested nature of public space would dominate Hunken’s later one person show about the trip, dubbed *Blondie of Arabia*.



*Monica Hunken, in field for Blondie of Arabia.*  
<http://www.monica hunken.com/Home.html>

On May 3, 2013, I took part in a discussion after one of Hunken's performances of *Blondie of Arabia* at the Culture Project, speaking on a panel with some of my favorite activists, some of my favorite people. The play was born after a Valentine's bike ride, as we shared stories, tea, and coffee, and Hunken regaled us with stories of her travels. The Culture Project's call for the May 3, 2013 event announced:

Join us after the show for a talk with Monica Hunken, Wendy Brawer (Founding Director of Green Map System), and Ben Shepard (author, professor and organizer with Time's Up! and ACT UP), moderated by Keegan Stephan (organizer with Time's Up!), to discuss bicycles as vehicles for social change.



*Monica Hunken's post-show panel with Keegan, Monica, Ben S, Wendy, Jen at a Bike Panel at the Culture Project. Photo by Josh Bisker*



## Benjamin Shepard

Keegan Stephan started the discussion at 45 Bleeker noting, "I'm onstage with a group of activists, a professor, and social worker, the founding director of an international system of map-making, a highly respected activist actress and educator, and an internationally acclaimed artist, photographer, and blogger," he explained. "Yet we're here to discuss bicycles — something most Americans consider toys for children, or a mark of a revoked driver's license. Why do you guys see bikes as vehicles for social change?"



*Cyclists and environmentalists have long collaborated. Photo  
Time's Up! New York*

Listening to Keegan, I reflected on my first experiences riding and becoming aware of public spaces and what they teach us about the city. Much of Hunken's play, after all, is about the specter of difference and how people relate to this in public space. I saw the street from an entirely new perspective when I first started riding bikes through suburban Atlanta and Dallas in the 1970's. One could see the treasures among the ruins of the streets, the vines winding out of the sidewalk. Meeting in abandoned lots we helped transform neglected spaces into places for bike adventures, races, and play. It was also a place to see the ways bodies intersect, conflict, and coexist in urban space. Riding my bike through

these spaces offered a unique vantage point with which to consider the struggles over difference in public space, including first encounters with police, who pulled me over with a friend who was Black, as we rode through the streets of Dallas. Here was the dark underbelly lurking beneath most southern cities. The encounter forced me to consider the question: what are differences in the way we see people in public space? How does cycling highlight this specter of difference? What is the difference between the ways people see a white blond woman riding her bike through Saudi Arabia or an African American teenager riding with friends and profiled by police in a Dallas suburb, or a Black body dancing on roller skates in Washington Square Park? Riding is a way to see a few images of what's really going on in a city and what we need to change. It is also a way to imagine that we can change it. Over the years, taking part in Critical Mass and Time's Up! rides, I saw that riding is a way to engage in a dialogue with this difference. It is a way to transform space, reshaping it from a route to work, a means of necessity, into a space for imagination, connection, and play.



*View of rubble beneath the Brooklyn Bridge from the East Side Bike Path. Photo by Shepard*

**Benjamin Shepard**



*Riding bikes is an experience in joy. Photo by Shepard*

This was part of the thinking of those who connected cycling with movements, from socialism to feminism, post 1960's anarchism to environmentalism, and public space activism. For many, the practice of cycling is about bodies in space and the ways they impact the streets and public spaces of our cities. It is about a clash of ideas and sensibilities.



*Lovelane joannasantangelo*

On the panel, Wendy pointed out that when the war began against Iraq in 2003, cyclists placed signs on their bikes declaring: "Bicycling: a quiet statement against oil wars." In this way, cycling supported efforts to limit the environmental and political damages of fossil fuels. Through cycling we help fashion a different kind of sustainable urbanism born of non-polluting transportation.

Jean Hillary, who was in Paris when bike share began, suggested that such cyclists changes cities, particularly with programs such as bike share which infuse the streets with thousands of cyclists, slowing traffic, demanding safety and security and support. At the time, bike share had just started in New York. Cycles also help us retrace our engagement with city, expanding a conversation about urban living, transportation, labor, and safety. Through it, we put our bodies on the line, acknowledge others, trusting them to acknowledge us, hopefully without fear of negating themselves.



*The human power of bikes, of energy bikes, seen in this picture in Zuccotti Park, are many noted several members of the panel. Each Time's Up! direct action reminds participants of this point.*

Along the way, we help engage within a dialogue with difference, as Hunken's play reminds us. It happens every time we chat, with other cyclists, pedestrians, drivers, and others in the streets. It is a space for conversation, as well as a means to break down barriers. As a model for imagining a new way of living with a rapidly warming, increasingly congested world, cycling is a precursor to changes in urban space, several panelists concluded.

"Its really about public space," noted Keegan.

"There is so much more we could have discussed!" Monica noted after the show. "Generator bikes at Liberty square and recovery work after Sandy and on and on, each of you individual fascinating projects and lives. I want to hear more!"

## **SQUATTING, GREEN MAPPING, AND DIY SOLUTIONS**

Time's Up!'s roots can be found in the squatting movement in New York City (Abu Ludhod, 1994). Here, regular people find a space which is underused, or not used at all, and transform it, so it becomes usable. Through squatting, those in communities lacking of housing or meaningful public space, take matters into their own hands to create spaces and shelter, where they can live and build community (Corr, 1999; Notes from Everywhere, 2003), reclaiming and repurposing space (Tips 4 Squatting in New York, nd). Time's Up! has built on this philosophy, honing a repertoire of direct action tactics aimed at making the urban environment more livable.

I first became familiar with Time's Up! in 1999 when the group was working with Reclaim the Streets, New York, a subcommittee of the Lower East Side Collective (LESC) (Shepard, 2011). Through links with both groups, Time's Up! connected itself into both local organizing projects and global struggles around sustainability, corporate globalization and anti-capitalism (Notes from Nowhere, 2003). Group meetings took place in community gardens behind squats in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. In the fall of 1999, we organized events in solidarity with the upcoming Seattle World Trade Organization meetings. At first, I took part in the group's do-it-yourself approach to creating and supporting community gardens, later joining efforts organized around non-polluting transportation, and alternative sources of power. In the same ways members squatted vacant spaces and repaired bikes left in the rubble, Time's Up! members brought elements of direct action, media activism, anarchism, as well as the insurrectionary possibilities of play to their efforts to improve the urban environment,



engaging regular people to become active players in their neighborhoods (Time's Up! Shepard, 2011).

Direct action is often considered a tool of opposition. And it certainly is. But it is more than that, it is also a tool of creation, with the aim of prefiguring a positive alternative to the status quo. Time's Up! uses direct action as a form of creation with each bike ride, garden clean up, and event the group supports. "Time's Up! calls it a celebration," explains Bill DiPaula, the group's founder. "We call a lot of our events celebrations. We don't block traffic, we are traffic. There's a lot of different words we use, but really we're celebrating what the streets could look like, or what the gardens could look like."

This spirit of creative direct action can be seen from the earliest efforts of Time's Up! volunteers. The first campaign focused on raising public awareness of environmental issues through DIY posters and art projects that introduced people to the connections between consumer choices and environmental issues including rainforest destruction, renewable energy, animal testing, pollution, and the need for clean water. These dada like photomontages offered an image of a city in need of public space, clean air, water and green possibilities.

In 1992, a Time's Up! member named Wendy Brawer started a project called Green Apple Map, which highlighted 145 sites which have an environmental impact in New York and the surrounding area. The project helped connect local issues into a global environmental movement. In subsequent years, the Green Map System expanded into a network of Green Map projects in hundreds of cities and countries around the world. Over 300 Green Maps have been published, five in New York alone (Notes from Nowhere, 2003; Time's Up!, 2012).

From the very beginning, the group realized that cycling and cycling infrastructure improves urban life. Each group ride helped promote the idea of shared road use between pedestrians, cyclists and cars in streets where cars normally dominate (Ferrell, 2002, Furness, 2010). The group routinely pushed for the urban environment to be less dominated by automobiles, calling for improvements in the infrastructure of the city to make the city more bike friendly, encouraging new cyclists help create a greener New York City (Time's Up! 2012).

The group pushed these ideas into the public with its group rides. Each ride drew different kinds of cyclists and offered them a way to explore the city in a safe way. Many riders were not comfortable riding through the mean streets of New York City, contending with cars on their own. In groups, riders felt more comfortable joining the cavalcade of cars,

pedestrians, pedicabs, motorcycles, and even horses crammed into the streets of New York City.

Take the Central Park Moonlight Ride, which began in 1994. "We tell people on the Moonlight Ride that this is an auto-free ride through the park, and you're not just on this ride, you're part of it," explained Bill DiPaola. "We need drops, we need sweeps, so come to the front and then drop and then mark that turn for the next person. It's this flowing thing where everybody on the ride becomes part of the ride. And I think when you make things fun you make theater, and that's kind of cool, because in a real community, everybody is part of the fun. There are little tricks you can do to get people involved. You can give them pinwheels or whistles, or give them a sheet where they can sing along to the song, where it's a much lighter connection—but they're still connected to the actual theater."

Gradually, each ride would become a highly participatory event, driven by the body of the group, not the organizers. Unlike a rally in which those in attendance stand around and hear someone else preach to them, each ride allowed people to actually take an active role. And people who joined the ride became leaders. One of the early riders was Barbara Ross. "A friend of mine was a messenger and he got a flyer for the Moonlight Ride," noted Ross. "And he said that sounds like a fun thing to do, so I went." Laughing, she recalled arriving late with a flat tire. "They were all very nice though. They filled up our tires and no one complained. It was really a lot of fun. We went all night. It was an amazing ride."

Ross started taking part in more rides. "I did the Central Park Traffic Calming Ride and then I did the Critical Mass Ride. And then I just remember more and more just really liking the group." She had been a part of NYPIRG in college. "But it was more like meeting and politics and stuff. This group is cool. They go out in Central Park and do stuff with cars. There's no meeting. You just go out and do it." She was immediately drawn to the group's do-it-yourself ethic, with parents, kids, and lots of people taking part in Critical Mass rides. "It was very community oriented, where the people in the group, even though they did activism together, would also go to dinner. We would watch out for each other. That was kind of a new concept for me. That also drew me to the group."

Gradually, many of those taking part in the rides became friends and a network of riders with similar affinities extended throughout the streets of the city (Crossley, 2002). The work and play of the group is primarily

supported through these networks. Over time the group added a monthly calendar of events, including bike repair workshops.

Keegan Stephen joined Time's Up! as a mechanic. In between fixing bikes, Keegan built a networks of friends organizing in New York. In between the meetings, rides, and actions, he saw friends clash and fight, dance, and try to push the lines between public and private space within a burlesque of do-it-yourself street activism. "I wouldn't have stuck around Time's Up! if it weren't for all the friends that I've made since I started working here," confessed Keegan. "Austin Horse was a good friend of mine from outside of Time's Up. He asked me to help Time's Up with their bicycle recycling project, so I did. It was basically a lot of long hours on summer nights in the backyard with Bill. Aside from Austin, Bill was probably my first friend in Time's Up! We became really good friends. I remember one night I decided to go through all the wheels, throw away the ones that were unsalvageable, and organize and price the ones that were good. It was a huge job, but I got inspired and I was gonna work until it was done. I didn't expect Bill to stay with me, but he strapped on a headlamp and we worked well past midnight. At one point our landlord walked back there while Bill was hanging from the rafters screwing in more wheel hooks. The landlord asked what we were doing, and Bill shouted out, 'Keegan's burning the candle and I'm right here with him.' He said it with such earnest excitement, I was sold. I knew this was the type of person I wanted to be working with to save the world – someone who was having a blast rearranging bike wheels after midnight on a Friday night when other people were out partying, just so people could come in and fix their bikes for free the next day." The group made participation fun and engaging.

Over time, these friendships continued to support a community of resistance as networks of cyclists, mechanics, public space advocates, anarchists, videographers, and street activists shared space within the group (Crossley, 2002). My kids refer to the group as "the Time's Up! gang" because when we get together we act more like friends than co-workers. They started using this term after we all sat around eating bagels singing songs outside the bike valet at the Clearwater Festival a few years ago. The group had been camping all weekend and running a free bike valet. The group thrives in spaces where they hang out, organize, and build community. Over time, reclaiming public space became an abiding principle of the group (Segal, 2012).



## **RECLAIMING SPACES, COMMUNITY GARDENING, AND SUSTAINABLE URBANISM**

In late August 2012, I received an e-mail on the Time's Up! list from Wendy Brawer, the global director of Green Maps Systems, announcing a plan for a guerilla gardening action on Stanton Street in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. 181 Stanton, where the action was planned, had been listed on the 596 Acres list of vacant lots in New York. In NYC, two thirds of all vacant lots are owned by the city and another third are owned by Gottlieb estate, which had substantial holdings in New York. In the Lower East Side, 181 Stanton was one of the last vacant lots that could be turned into a garden. On Sunday August 19th, I met a group of activists from the Time's Up! standing outside of a fence in front of 181 Stanton Street. Outside, Wendy Brawer and Susan Howard were holding clip boards with petitions asking people if they wanted a new community garden. Those walking by enthusiastically supported their efforts. The group had dismantled a fence at the entrance. Inside the lot, my daughters and I joined a half dozen members of the Time's Up! Gardening Committee as well as other neighborhood members. We spent the afternoon digging, cleaning the lot, throwing away trash, and finally, planting a few flowers. By the end of the afternoon, the vacant lot had been transformed into a community space (Siegel, 2012). Within a few weeks, many of the 250 people who signed the petition in favor of a new community garden swayed the Parks and Recreation Committee of Community Board Three to pass a resolution of support for a green thumb lease for the garden, now dubbed Siempre Verde. Thanks to the work of the neighbors on Stanton Street, members of Green Map System, and Time's Up!, 181 Stanton became the newest of a generation of gardens planted in the neighborhood since the Liz Christy Garden was planted in the Bowery in 1974. Like Liz Christy, many of New York's Community gardens were born of the New York fiscal crisis of the mid-1970's. In response to urban decline, community gardens provided the eyes on the street which Jane Jacobs (1961/1992) argued was essential for healthy neighborhoods. Over the next four decades, these green spaces, born of sweat equity, continued to support healthy environments by preventing crime, reducing asthma rates, increasing property values, providing food security, and cooling the earth. They represent a model of DIY community building (Notes from Nowhere, 2003, Shepard, 2011).

Time's Up! has long supported the community garden movement, collaborating with the More Gardens! coalition and the Lower East Side Collective (LESC), as well as efforts by newer groups such as 596 Acres

and the OWS Sustainability Committee. In 1997, the group worked with the LESC public space group to help defend the community gardens of the Lower East Side. Members took part in a wide range of garden defense activities including blockades of endangered gardens such as Chico Mendez Mural and Esperanza Community Gardens. In 1999, the group participated in the successful direct action campaign to save 500 community gardens from being auctioned off and developed by the city. The blockade at Esperanza, on 7th Street between B and C, drew so much attention that the attorney general of New York State, Elliot Spitzer, helped broker a deal to protect the gardens in 2002 (Shepard, 2011).

Throughout these years, Time's Up! was always ready to mobilize cyclists to defend community spaces. Bill DiPaula recalled those garden defense actions as some of his favorite actions with Time's Up! "I think the first one was where we made puppets to save a garden," recalled DiPaula, who helped organize the garden defense blockades at Chico Mendez and Esperanza gardens. "The idea was to make one of our bike rides a More Gardens' ride. There was a crazy amount of workshops with More Gardens, and we made all these cool bikes and stuff. The idea was that once people knew about all the workshops they would realize the ride was going to be fun. Then we had an after event in an endangered garden. I think it was Stannard Digs. The idea was to hype up the event as a lot of fun, go on a really great ride to draw more people in, then hold a great event at an endangered garden, and while everyone was having so much fun enjoying community and a public space, we would say, 'Hey, did you know the city is trying to destroy this garden? Why don't you sign this petition to save it or get involved?' So it was a way to have fun, participate in non-polluting transportation, and save community gardens."

Part of the efficacy of the cycling defense of community gardens was helping people to see the gardens. "A lot of people liked that idea, but were a little afraid of the neighborhoods these gardens were actually in, so the element of movement was very important," explained DiPaula. "We could start these bike rides in nicer neighborhoods, then bring them to the community gardens, and the transition was seamless. People could see that parts of these neighborhoods they were afraid of actually had some of the best communities in the whole city. Then they would sign up to save them." Along the way, those involved enjoyed connecting with other neighborhood members while supporting their own local community gardens.

## **Benjamin Shepard**

Over the eight years after the Spitzer agreement, Time's Up! honed its advocacy for community gardens, participating in Earth Celebrations, organizing roving garden parades through the gardens, garden clean up days, and advocating in support of the Children's Magical Garden. In 2010, when the Spitzer Agreement ended, Time's Up! helped sound the alarm about the threat to the gardens, organizing a Paul Revere ride to Bloomberg's House to ask him to beef-up the new garden agreement, specifically calling for increased protections for gardens. The group testified at garden hearings, held rallies, wrote editorials, and lobbied with the attorney general's office to help improve the garden agreement. Ultimately, the city beefed-up the agreement (Shepard and Smithsimon, 2011; Shepard, 2011).

"They [the gardens] are places where people can go and talk about the new power plant, or how can we rebuild something, or how we can work together," noted Bill DiPaula "Not only do the gardens provide clean air and a place where people can grow their own food, they are this amazing public space where people can work together, and I think the city is very scared of that. They're not so much scared of the community gardens because they wanted to put a building there and make money, they're scared of the fact that people can meet in these community gardens and organize. That was the reason why the squat gardens were the first to go, cause those were the ones where most of the organizing was going on." For members of Time's Up!, the attacks on the gardens were very simple. These were spaces where regular people organized, shaping their own autonomous movements, where they could participate in their own democracy. "If you look at what happened, the Dos Blockos Garden [which was bulldozed], so many of the squat gardens," notes DiPaula. "These were gardens next to squats and there was a lot of late-night organizing and parties going on. There was a different type of political discussion there. Certainly when the status quo is questioned, it's going to be questioned a lot harder and a lot faster and with more force if it's being questioned in a political or a community situation that the city doesn't agree with." Consequentially, these representational spaces became targets. The group learned an important lesson with the gardens, one that was useful when spaces where cyclists met and rode became similar targets. Here, as with the bike lanes, direct action would remain a core tactic for the group.

## **NON-POLLUTING TRANSPORTATION - FROM THE BATTLE OF THE BIKE BAN TO CONTESTED BIKE LANES**

On July 22, 1987, Mayor Koch stood on the steps of City Hall flanked by his police and transportation commissioners and declared that bicycling would be banned on Fifth, Park, and Madison Avenues from 31st to 59th Streets, Monday-Friday, 10am-4pm, starting in September (Finder, 1987). "The ban was clearly an attack on bike messengers, who were being scapegoated in the press for the dangerous and congested streets of NYC. Any unbiased observer could see (and still can) that the actual cause of danger and congestion in our city's streets was automobiles. Fortunately, the ban brought together the cycling community in a spirit of direct action that helped usher in an era of victories for a livable city," wrote Keegan Stephan. Cyclists started organizing, doing what regular people have often done when faced with an injustice. In the weeks following Koch's ban, cyclists reclaimed public space for non-polluting, sustainable transportation for everyone.

"That spirit of direct action rose, as it always does, from the streets," noted Steve Athineos, a bike messenger who helped organize the twice-weekly direct action bike rides that helped defeat the ban.

According to Charles Komanoff, who was then president of the advocacy group Transportation Alternatives, "Masses of cyclists, sometimes half a thousand and occasionally more, spread across Sixth Avenue and paraded the three miles from Houston Street to Central Park South. Our stately pace, perhaps 5mph, was slow enough that passers-by could look past our bikes and see our bodies and faces. Walkers and joggers could join our ranks. We were slow enough that we could and did stop at red lights. Letting foot and auto traffic cross at the green was a stroke of genius. It certified cycling as city friendly." And the ban was eventually defeated in the courts and the streets of public opinion.

September 2012, Keegan and others in Time's Up! helped organize a bike ride to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the defeat of the bike ban, as well as the twentieth anniversary of Critical Mass, an autonomously organized bike ride that takes place on the last Friday of the month in cities around the world. After the ride, cyclists met for a movie about the 1987 Bike Ban and a panel discussion. One of the panelists was Monica Hunken, a Time's Up! volunteer, who rides her bike in cities around the world, in between organizing Occupy events and solo theatrical performances. In an interview with the Culture Project (2011), Hunken explained why cycling is political in urban spaces. "New York City is a perfect city for bike riding. It is mostly flat and everything

## **Benjamin Shepard**

is relatively close together. It is also cluttered, congested and asthmatic. We need more bike lanes just much as we need more parks, gardens, and public spaces. I have been volunteering with Time's-up! since the 2004 Republican National Convention when there was another surge of crackdowns on bicyclists. I work with Time's Up! because we celebrate the joy of biking and reclaiming public space for the people. We create roving dance parties and themed bike rides drawing attention to saving community gardens, protecting bike lanes, keeping Wal-Mart out of NYC, and other local issues. We use our bodies as the means and the message. By powering ourselves we are less reliant on the destructive overuse of fossil fuels." For members of Time's Up! cycling is political, but it is also fun.

It is also a gesture of direct action, in which the group creates its own power, not unlike Gandhi's call for non-violent civil disobedience. Gandhi was famous for leading his followers to make salt, even if it meant facing arrest and forcing a change in laws. The campaign, the Salt Satyagraha, challenged a British salt tax when the English still ruled India with colonial law. The campaign began with the Salt March to Dandi in 1930, and it ended with the peaceful end of colonial rule in England (Ackerman and DuVall, 2001). Gandhi implored his followers to spin their own fabric in defiance of British colonial rule. In doing so, he suggested they could create their own power. Energy emanated from spinning their own cotton to create their own clothing. "The spinning wheel represents to me the hope of the masses," stated Gandhi. The same thing happens with people-powered energy – Time's Up cycling events and energy bikes, recharging people's phones, while sharing our lives with others. Through each ride, members of TimesUp! divest ourselves from dependence on fossil fuels, while sharing what we have. (Shepard, 2013).

Each ride listed on the Time's Up! calendar is intended to raise awareness of environmental issues in a festive fashion. Group rides gave those involved the confidence to become everyday commuters, while putting pressure on the city to create safer infrastructure for cycling while the city pushed to create a more suburban model which favored cars and a Robert Moses-like vision of urban space (Hammett and Hammett, 2007). Time's Up won this struggle. Ridership increased almost 100% from 2000-2007. In response, in 2008 the Bloomberg administration appointed a bike friendly Transportation Commissioner, who favored auto-free zones, and increased bike lanes and pedestrian plazas (Time's Up!, 2012). But this transition did not come without a fight.

In 2003, Time's Up! helped organize Bike Summer, which consisted of diverse cycling events all summer long. The group held Earth Day Rides to Central Park and marches down Fifth Ave. Bike Summer Critical Mass included a boisterous ride across the 59th street bridge to Socrates Sculpture Park. Over time, cycling became part of many New Yorkers' politics and communities.

"I guess the Traffic Calming Ride made me feel like wanting to do something about the cars in the park," explained Barbara Ross. And the police began to take notice. "We were confronted on the ride. And I think the major thing was on Earth Day when we were riding over and were stopped on the way." Even with police following the ride, more people joined. "There were some chases. It wasn't an orderly thing but we would go through the police's area and they would chase us. They would arrest a few people but it was really rare. I was usually able to get away." Yet, there was still very little room for cyclists on the streets. "In the park, the cars think its their lane, so walkers and cyclists have to share the bike lane," explained Ross.

With each advance in cycling, the police seemed to crack down even more. In response, Time's Up! supported a politics of fun. "To just ride around having a good time seems like just an odd concept" noted Barbara Ross. But that's what this group sets out to do. Bill DiPaula concurred. "I talked to Chris Carlson [the founder of Critical Mass] extensively about some of this stuff because I told him that I was having trouble keeping group rides going. He explained that I had to make them more fun. And then coming back from Seattle, I thought what would be fun is a moving circus, like fun on your bike with puppets. A circus would be fun. People like circuses, and they could be part of it. That's the key: people just can't be watching fun, they have to be part of the fun. I think corporate America looks at fun like it's something you need to watch. It's not something you need to participate in."

By 2004, corporate America was planning the Republican National Convention scheduled for August of that year. This period at the beginning of the war was marked by a dark McCarthy like climate. The Patriot Act was enforced with a vengeance, Critical Mass rides were criminalized, and it felt like people-power was at an all time low. Still, Time's Up! stayed the course, reminding the world that there is nothing wrong with people getting together and building community as they express their constitutional rights to petition the government for a redress of grievances. "We don't block traffic, we are traffic," explains DiPaula, describing Critical Mass. "Its a celebration of what the streets could look like." Police saw this expression as a form of disorderly conduct, which

needed to be cracked down upon. Many dropped out of activism. Yet, Time's Up! stayed the course, beat back a lawsuit by the city enjoining the group to cease organizing the Critical Mass rides, and birthed affinity groups organizing to fight for sustainability, community gardens, and safety in bike lanes (Shepard and Smithsimon, 2011).

"I've been arrested twice at Critical Mass. Once during the RNC at the bike bloc ride and once on August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2004," recalled Barbara Ross. "Some ten thousand riders showed up for a ride a couple days before my first arrest, catching the NYPD off-guard. On the ride at which I was arrested, there were actually very few cars out. We were providing support, but the NYPD was out to get us. I think that not only the NYPD, but also the federal government, did a lot to prepare for the RNC. I think they started to take note of activist groups like ours in the lead-up to the RNC. Whenever we're in court, The NYPD bring up this ride. We rode up the FDR, through the Battery Park Tunnel, and across the car lanes of many bridges. It was the funnest ride. The police didn't do much, but they always seem to mention that ride and no other.

"When I was arrested in August, there were a lot of people, a lot of press, and a lot of arrests. All these people were biking and then they ended up arresting them all, and it looked horrible in the press. We were just riding through midtown and suddenly these motorcycles cut us off. We thought they were some sort of Republican motorcycle gang. They swerved in front of us really dangerously. It was pretty scary. They ran us down and at least 40 of us were arrested. We were all held together in a makeshift jail on the Hudson, later called Guantanamo-on-the-Hudson, for 30 hours. It was so crowded, but they only put one bench in there. There was nowhere to sit other than on the ground, which was covered with grease. We were there for so long that I passed out. I woke up and I was face down on concrete. It was disgusting. The police there were pretty nice. They realized this was pretty silly. But once we got to the toms, oh boy were they nasty. One guy was on a major power trip. He made us walk around together like a chain gang.

"Besides being arrested those two times, I've also had my bike confiscated two other times."

Getting her bike back represented a Kafkaesque experience for Ross. "You have to go to the bike jail, which is in Brooklyn and conveniently not by any subways," she laughed. Despite the setbacks, Ross and the others in Time's Up! keep coming back and defending the First Amendment. "First of all, because it is fun and because the police really want to stop this ride," explained Ross. "I feel like I have to keep going because they have no right to stop this ride"

For Bill DiPaula, the attack on the ride was simple. "When something is so successful, it causes a reaction. In our case, the reaction was obviously a positive reaction in one camp. Bicycling is up in New York City and has been up. Many different types of people are bicycling."

In the following years, Time's Up! members litigated against the city, successfully suing the city for its attacks on the ride and sweeps at protests, with several people winning significant awards. Other Time's Up volunteers started holding increasingly silly rides designed to contrast the actions of cyclists with those of the police who refused to enforce their own rules prohibiting cars from parking in the bike lanes. These direct action based rides created their own defiant form of power, which seemed to subvert the NYPD which never interfered. "I went on the clown ride cause I thought this was a great way to bring attention to the bike lane issue," explained Ross, who helped organize the rides. Others, who had been impacted personally, turned to documenting police misconduct.

## **VIDEO ACTIVISM**

The year that Critical Mass bike rides started in San Francisco, the whole world witnessed the beating of Rodney King in the Spring of 1992. By this time, the video camera had become perhaps the most effective tool an activist could have. Time's Up! started its own video documentary team in 1998, joining the burgeoning Independent Media Movement to create alternative media by and for activists.

"We always have a lot of great video artists working with Time's Up! and they made a great video of that garden being destroyed" explained Bill DiPaula. "It was played on TV over and over again, and that really hurt the city in the long run. Our videos accomplished a similar thing with the squats. The city brought in a tank down 13<sup>th</sup> Street to destroy a building that people were living in, and when people saw our video of this, they realized how disgusting it is that the city is constantly trying to destroy communities. We lost that squat, but that video reflected so badly on the city, that people got fed-up and started to get involved. A lot of what we do doesn't work immediately, but it prevents things from happening again. It gets people involved, and it reflects poorly on the city."

Time's Up! has consistently challenged misuse of power by the police by presenting its own video evidence of attacks on friendly community activity, including Critical Mass Rides. Their work drew the attention of the New York Times, which documented the aggressive and dangerous



## **Benjamin Shepard**

approach the police were taking in chasing down and arresting participants in Critical Mass. When NYPD Police Officer Patrick Pogan was caught on video aggressively knocking cyclist Christopher Long off his bicycle during the July 25, 2008 Critical Mass bicycle ride, the officer responsible was indicted on five charges, including Falsifying Business Records and Offering a False Instrument for Filing in the First Degree, both Class E felonies, and Assault in the Third Degree, a Class A misdemeanor, and later convicted, losing his job. This all transpired because Time's Up volunteers secured and distributed the video that challenged the official story advanced by City lawyers. In this case and countless others, the video camera had become a vital tool for direct action based campaigns organized by the group.

## **CYCLING AND THE OWS SUSTAINABILITY COMMITTEE**

By 2011 and '12, members of Time's Up! joined the burgeoning Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement, taking part in the environmental cluster on several days of action including as part of an action anticipating Occupy on May 12, 2011, as part of May Day and September 17th one year anniversary actions. After all, for years before Occupy, cyclists took part on bike blocks defending gardens, scouting and doing communication for countless movements and convergence actions.

May 12, 2011, cyclists helped coordinate communication for a rally downtown with labor, environmental, and health movements joining and marking the beginning workings of Occupy. I was pulled into the organizing by a group of AIDS activists from Health Gap and ACT UP who called to ask if Time's Up!, could coordinate a roving bike-block/communications team to report on the conditions of the labyrinthine streets of Lower Manhattan, as we had done during the convergence actions of global justice movement's peak years and continue to do the last Friday of every month during Critical Mass. While teachers marching downtown from City Hall had a permit, the same was not true of the other groups who intended to converge on Wall Street to push the bankers to pay their fair share. Using walkie-talkies and a text message loop, we hoped to help everyone know which streets were blocked off and which tributaries remained open.



*The map for a May 12, 2011 action anticipating Occupy. The bike bloc helped coordinate the communications for the downtown action*

On September 17th, 2012 members of the group dressed like polar bears and plead for the world to save the humans. "Financial crisis is climate crisis," cried the bears on bikes, as they took part in the day of action. "Wall Street is Drowning Us!" "We want system change, not climate change."

Cyclists also took part in the OWS Sustainability Committee, helping transfer food supplies and waste to and from community gardens in the Lower East Side. Bicycles were seen as part of a DIY solution to a range of problems faced by the movement. "One night the city raided the camp and took away all the gas generators. It was right before that big nor'easter on Saturday [October 29]" explained Keegan Stephen. "There were 40 cases of hypothermia that night. People thought it was fucked up and were looking for answers. Occupy Boston said that they had five bike-powered generators that they could get there the next day. Somebody from M.I.T. who was at Boston came down with supplies and helped us build a ramshackle system made out of wood but that actually charged batteries" (Chafkin, 2012). Later Time's Up! helped push this

## Benjamin Shepard

project forward bringing more bikes and generators, which powered the occupation until the final raid (Writers for the 99%, 2011). The generators proved invaluable after Super Storm Sandy when members of the group organized Fossil Fuel relief rides to transfer supplies and bike generators by bike to the hardest hit areas of New York (Shepard, 2013).

### TIME'S UP! AND ITS ALLIES

On April 25, 2012, Time's Up! brought its sound system down to City Hall for the group to use for speeches during its twenty fifth anniversary action. The group would hold its own silver anniversary party later that summer. At that event, the group celebrated its quarter century of Green Mapping, cycling, community gardening, as well as coalition work.



*ACT UP borrowed the Times Up! sound bike for its ACT UP 25 Anniversary action. Photo by Brennan Cavanaugh*

Through the discussion of the case study of Time's Up! readers trace a story of direct action, as well as collaboration. Over the years, Time's Up! has worked with groups ranging from the More Gardens Coalition to the Occupy Wall Street Sustainability Committee, as well as supporting actions by ACT UP, Radical Homosexual Agenda, and countless others.

The group has effectively served as a compliment to liberal-based campaigns, with support from Transportation Alternatives and the New York City Garden Coalition. Some groups sit at the policy table, while others, such as Time's Up!, are more effective at pushing their message through street-based actions and theatrics. As of now, the group seems to know what it is, and is not, good at. While some groups go to community board members, Time's Up! seems more effective outside these discussions. The case study of Time's Up! highlights the utility of direct action to compliment larger efforts aimed at social change, or the inside-outside strategy as political scientist and Time's Up! supporter Ron Hayduk explains. "The interconnections of the inside-outside strategy is where the action is at," notes Hayduk. "If you want the Utopian ends, you gotta find the means that work and that's the inside-outside. You gotta start here, where the people are at. That's where the play comes in...." (quoted in Shepard, 2011). The case of Time's Up! suggests there is room in both the streets and the board rooms, on the inside and pushing an agenda from the outside as Time's Up! has done. Yet, this does not suggest there is not more for a direct action group such as Time's Up! to do in terms of expanding coalition partners.

Questions about capacity, leadership, sustainability, and alliances are still important for the group as it seeks to move forward, retain volunteers, and remain effective. In terms of organizational structure, the group is still evolving from a grassroots group to a non-profit with a grassroots arm, struggling to balance both while avoiding the pitfalls of the non-profit-industrial-complex which seems to consume community groups (Incite, 2007). Still, the case of Time's Up! suggests direct action, play-based strategy has an impact on urban space, success, and mobilization.

## **CONCLUSION - DANCING AT THE TIME'S UP! 25 PARTY**

Over the last twenty-five years Time's Up! has helped us see the city as a malleable work of art, influenced by the gestures of artists, activists, creative urban planners and guerilla gardeners. Despite ongoing attacks, cycling is on the upswing. Faced with multiple challenges to riding in a global city, activists maintain a flexible disposition. Some rides fade while others take new forms, creating new kinds of communities of care, fun and resistance.

Meanwhile, members of Time's Up! are involved in a range of projects, including the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space, aimed at

documenting the change created through DIY politics from gardens to non-polluting transportation.

In July 2012, Time's Up! held a party for its 25th anniversary. The event included speakers, as well as live music and lots of dancing. At its best, the group has helped make riding and engaging in street activism a joyous, highly participatory endeavor. This makes participation intriguing and inviting. Time's Up! lives up to Emma Goldman's disposition that if there is not dancing, it is not our revolution. "There are people like Rev. Billy and other colorful community characters, a lot of artists" explained Bill DiPaula. "We all worked together."

Throughout the years, Time's Up! members have been able to celebrate the tragicomic theater of the modern metropolis. In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, power was down for days in the Lower East Side. So the group brought out the energy bikes to help people charge their phones. With public transportation into Manhattan from Brooklyn at a standstill, including the essential L train, and gridlock in the streets, bicycles served as a great solution to keep the city moving through the crisis. The group provided free bike repair as well as bikes, food and a parade through the neighborhood. "This was great for theater, but a lot of the artists were unaware of the political aspects of what we were doing," noted DiPaula. "... in conjunction with all the erratic weather happening all over... It's really waking people up... People are more likely to realize that we're all one, which is really great. People are also coming in who don't fully understand the message, but we don't shove it down their throats. That's something we pride ourselves on at Time's Up! We don't over-speak to people. We let them use their own mind, to let them figure it out themselves." If people were not enjoying themselves they were not going to be able to stay involved. Instead, the group helped make the revolution fun.

Through case study, this report has explored some of the ways Time's Up! has built on the lessons of squatting to fashion a model of sustainable urbanism during the twenty-five years from 1987-2012.

Using the tools of the DIY movement, the group has helped create community gardens as well as a model of non-polluting transportation seen as a solution to a myriad of problems. Over and over regular people have a leadership role in this movement as active participants, influencing contests over access to public space. Times Us! has reminded supporters that success is not guaranteed with each action but that they have a much better chance of succeeding if they do fight for what they want, much better than doing nothing at all. And if people enjoy

themselves along the way, they may be willing to stick it out over the long term.

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